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The World of *The Cat's Table*: Literature Through Production Design Analysis

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The World of *The Cat's Table*:
Literature Through Production Design Analysis

Andrea Johnson

Production design represents a wonderful blending of my two fields of study: English and Film Media. Design work is grounded in details and reality and is only as good as the research and analysis of the written work that inspires it.

The Cat's Table by Michael Ondaatje tells the story of Michael, an 11 year old boy, travelling from Sri Lanka to England in the 1950s on the *Oronsay*. He knows he will meet his mother, who he has not seen in years, in England so, in many ways, this journey becomes his last romp through childhood.

I chose to work with the novel *The Cat's Table* because of the way the novel is structured - instead of working with an overarching plot, the novel is based around its characters and their growth. The beauty and cleverness of the novel are the details that ground the characters and the way Ondaatje channels real life by having secondary characters move in and out of the protagonist's consciousness (just as people move in and out of our own lives).

“Our table's status on the *Oronsay* continued to be minimal, while those at the Captain's Table were constantly toasting one another's significance. That was a small lesson I learned on the journey. What is interesting and important happens mostly in secret, in places where there is no power.” (Ondaatje, p.75) This passage inspired my project. The idea that the best moments in life are captured in the secret and private spaces rather than the public space. This doesn't just refer to the physical space but the emotional state of people as well. Most characters in the novel are often scarred in some way, but their stories are not offered to us. It is our duty as an audience and my duty as a designer to think through the implications of this and how it affects the narrative.

All the items present in the exhibit were gathered over the semester. My advisor, Rob Cohen, introduced me to an interior designer friend of his, Andrea Martesian, who helped me begin the gathering process. She had a pretty vast collection of items that she allowed me to use for the project and pointed out some great vintage, antique, and thrift shops that I visited pretty regularly to continue buying props.

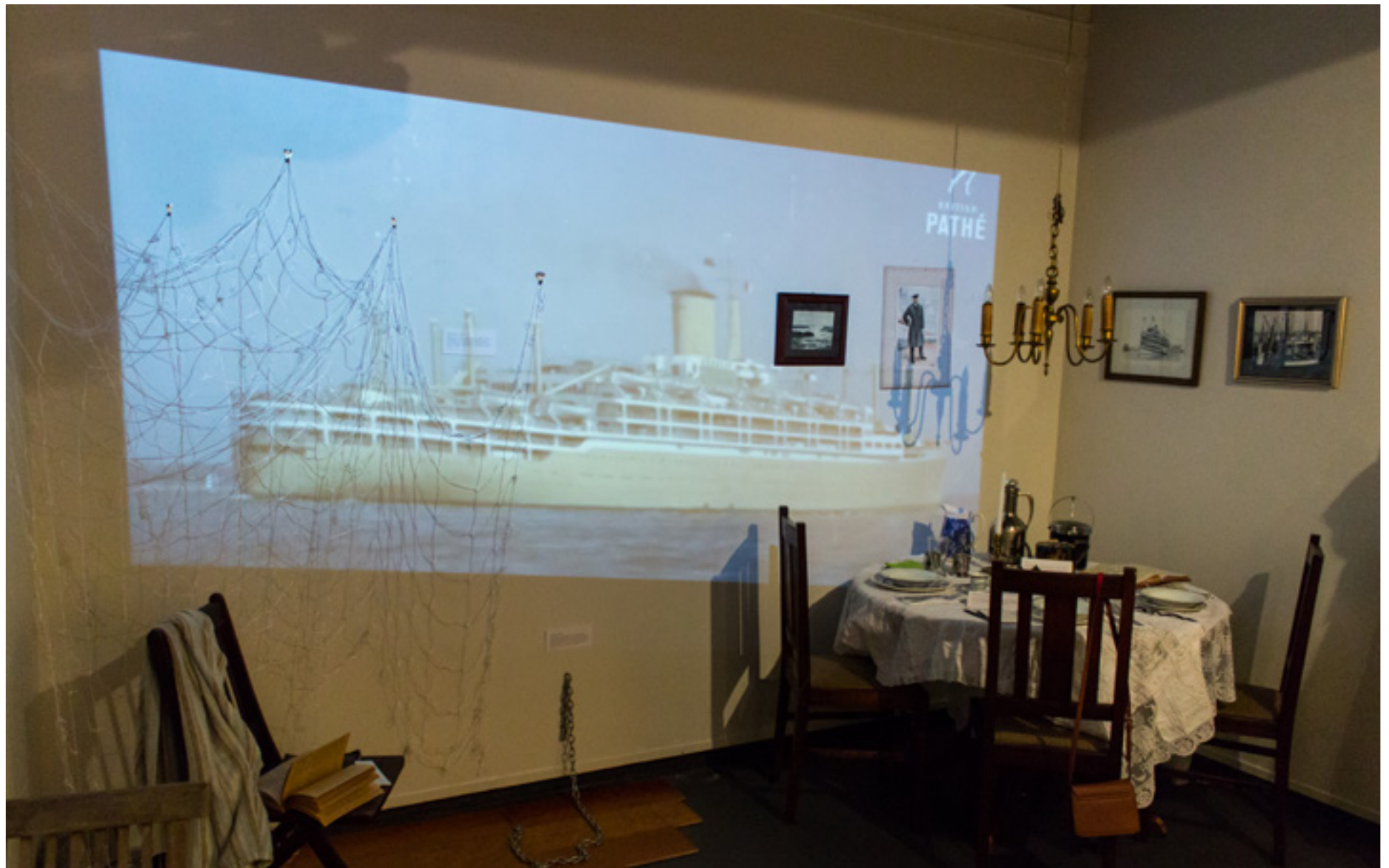
The props and scene setting were all tied together with a video and audio projection. I wanted to make clear that as soon as you stepped into the space you were also stepping into the novel. The ship in the novel, the SS *Oronsay*, was a real ocean liner that sailed in the 1950s and 1960s. I found two videos taken by passengers on the ship and edited them together to create a disjointed collection of moments to project on one of the walls, right over the 'deck' of the ship and the cat's table. The soundscape was created in collaboration with a student named Nathan Goncalves and consisted of ambient noises (waves, seagulls, chatter, chains, lounge music, etc.) remixed to mimic the motion of a ship. The audio was edited to bounce between speakers, and the small room where I set up my exhibit meant that there was a prominent echo.

The exhibit space was carefully planned to flow from the outside of the ship and external struggles of the characters to the inside and internal thoughts of the characters. Upon entering the space you were faced with the 'deck' of the ship: wooden planks, a deck chair and ropes worked together to reflect the sparse outside while quickly establishing the world.

From there you move on to the actual cat's table (the farthest table from the Captain's table in the dining room and the least privileged position). The table incorporated small details that reflected the characters that sat there. The details and props were more prominent once you moved into 'the prop corner', this was a series of tables set up with various items that reflected characters and moments from the novel.

Finally, the last big art piece of the exhibit was a bulletin board that housed a large textile collage of moments from the novel that could not be represented through props or sets.

Each prop and set had signage to accompany it, printed with passages taken from the novel that inspired the selection and inclusion of each. The following pages are filled with photos taken of my project along with some of these passages.





There are times when a storm invades the landscape of the Canadian Shield, where I live during the summers, and I wake up believing I am in mid-air, at the height of the tall pines above the river, watching the approaching lighting, and hearing behind it the arrival of its thunder. It is only from such a height that you see the great choreography and danger of storms.

(Ondaatje, p.89)





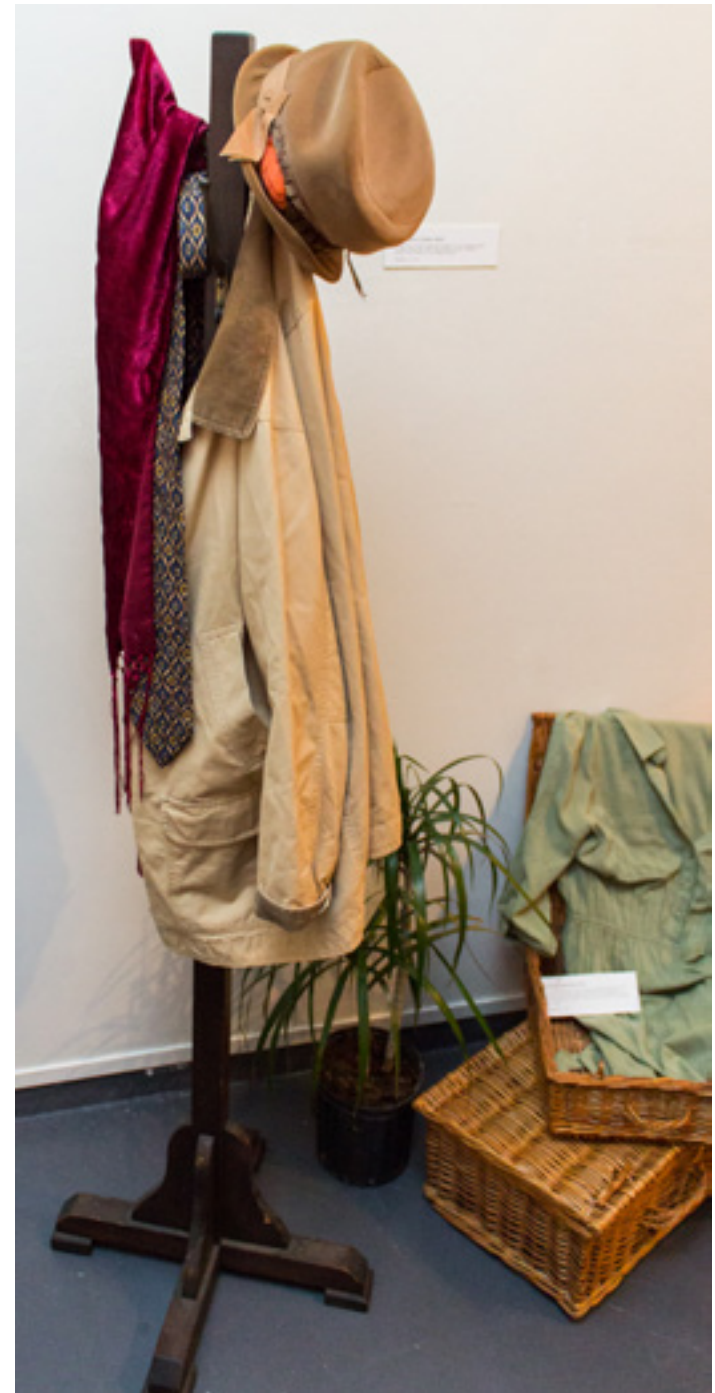
“We seem to be at the cat’s table,” the woman called Miss Lasqueti said. “We’re in the least privileged place.” It was clear we were located far from the Captain’s Table, which was at the opposite end of the dining room.

(Ondaatje, p.8)



Mr. Nevil later pointed out that there appeared to be a more serious wound across Mr. Gunsekera's throat, which he kept covered with the red cotton scarf he always wore.

(Ondaatje, p.198)







Then we saw a golden light. It was more than that. As we came closer it was a field of colour. This was the “garden” Mr. Daniels was transporting to Europe. We stood in front of it, and then Cassius and I and even Ramadhin began racing through the narrow aisles, leaving Mr. Daniels in a crouch, studying a plant.

(Ondaatje, p.47)



On my last day, I found an empty school examination booklet, a pencil, a pencil sharpener, a traced map of the world, and put them into my small suitcase.

(Ondaatje, p.7)





It was, he murmured, a dangerous profession, of course. And it was painful to realize that nothing was permanent, not even an ocean liner. [...] He had been there to help dismantle the *Normandie* — “the most beautiful ship ever built” — as it lay charred and half drowned in the Hudson River in America. “But somehow even that was beautiful ... because in a breaker’s yard you discover anything can have a new life, be reborn as part of a car or railway carriage, or a shovel blade. You take that older life and you link it to a stranger.”

(Ondaatje, p.72)

